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ABSTRACT

Each of these ten creative writing assignments includes a model poem, a writing idea, and suggested discussions or activities related to the writing idea. The assignments can be used to stimulate either poetry or prose writing. (Author/AA)

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CREATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON "BASIC" PROCESSES

Each assignment includes a model poem, a writing idea, and suggested discussions or activities which relate to the writing idea. Each assignment can be used to stimulate either poetry writing or prose writing.

The assignments are based upon things which adolescents do. These assignments are, however, by no means limited to adolescents. The idea is to impel students (of all ages) to discover and re-discover the real and imagined relationships among self/world/other.

Theoretical background for these practices is in a journal article "Existential Phenomenology and Personal Writing" (CCC, October, 1975). Maybe someone can connect these practices to that theory; I can't, tangibly!

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CS 202 890

DRIVING (WASTING TIME)

Robert Bly - DRIVING TO TOWN LATE TO MAIL A LETTER

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted.

TO THE TEACHER:

A narrative description which ends in a quiet "I" shock of recognition. Before reading the poem, you might want to tell students some of your favorite ways of wasting time. Be quirky. Try to slip in some things which, from a pragmatic point of view, might seem like a waste of time; however, from a deeper point of view you might see another kind of value in your activities. Ask students for some of their favorite "time-wasting" activities. Now read the poem.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:

Write a poem about some things that you do to waste time. Is it a waste of time when you go fishing and do not catch a "real" fish? Shoot from the hip. Be crazy, if you like. You might want to catalog these ways of wasting time. No need to explain why, unless you want to. The reader will understand deep down.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:

The poem and poetry writing idea speak to the adolescent's fascination with locomotion, and to the adolescent's need for moratorium.

PLAYING SPORTS (FANTASIZING)

Kenneth Patchen - THE ORIGIN OF BASEBALL

Someone had been walking in and out

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TO THE TEACHER:

The universal human process of myth-making or story-telling is embodied by the poem. Myth-making and story-telling have been with us ever since a man in a cave carved a beast, with the action of the beast being implied. The symbolization of process and setting is a very ancient one. Before reading the poem, you might ask the students to tell some myths about the origins of things--e.g., hair, elephants, ceilings, greeting, running, etc. I think you will find that your students can do this quite well. The myths can be daffy and/or serious. Now read the poem. Notice the psychologically accurate and visionary conception of sublimation in the last five lines.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:

Write a poem which shows the origin of some thing or process.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:

The poem and poetry writing idea address the adolescent's need to fantasize. Fantasy, sports, and writing are possible forms of sublimation, and speak to the adolescent's needs.

MOVING; FEELING GOOD ABOUT ONESELF

David Ignatow - THE BAGEL

I stopped to pick up the bagel

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TO THE TEACHER:

The life of this poem comes from Ignatow's ability to become one with the joy and energy of an object - even an object that is normally thought of as being somewhat mundane or humble. It is a poem which attacks alienation, a poem which implies a celebrative communion with the reader, a kind of poem sadly lacking in most anthologies. Ask the students to remember running with or running after something in a state of pure joy. There is a jog and there is a sprint, both embodying their own particular states of mind. What makes Ignatow run? - What makes you run? - What makes Updike's Rabbit Angstrom run? Play some music that embodies movement and energy. Maybe Beethoven or "Three Blind Mice." Better yet, let the students bring in their own music (intrinsic motivation - that's one of our pedagogical tools!). Or go outside and run and run and run just for the pure gratuitous hell of it.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:

The poem and poetry writing idea speak to the adolescent's fascination with locomotion, and to the need to feel good about oneself. "Basic trust" in self and world is implicit.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:

Write a <u>movement</u> poem in which you are "strangely happy" with yourself.

STEREOTYPING; BEING CONCERNED WITH APPEARANCES; CLANNISHNESS

Edward Arlington Robinson - RICHARD CORY

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich - yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

TO THE TEACHER:
"Selective perceiving" and stereotyping are two of the universal human processes found in the poem. The following stereotypings might be familiar: "dummy"; "loser"; "bigmouth"; "jock"; "middleclass"; "snob"; "tacky"; "nerd"; "redneck"; "zero"; "hot"; "nigger"; "honky"; "winner"; "bad dude"; "looker"; etc. Ask the students for some other names.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:
Write a poem about what happens to a real or imaginary person who has been stereotyped.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:
The poem and poetry writing idea impel the adolescent to examine his concern with appearances, and his concern with "in-group" thinking.

REMEMBERING CHILDHOOD

Cesar Vallejo - TO MY BROTHER MIGUEL IN MEMORIAM

Brother, today I sit on the brick bench of the house,

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TO THE TEACHER:

The poem embodies the process of remembering childhood. Notice that Vallejo employs the technique of "addressing a person." Vallejo's poem is unpretentious, a quality that is most difficult to achieve in this most selfconscious of centuries. Tell the students that most great writings occur when the writer is not trying to write "A GREAT WRITING." Writing begins where one is, with what one knows--cite the examples of Shakespeare, Frost, Kerouac, Faulkner, and the Hemingway of the Nick Adams stories. Not only is this information encouraging to students, it's also true.

Ask the students to call out a number of childhood games that they used to play. I would suggest that you do this before the students have read the poem, thereby intensifying and perhaps personalizing the experience of the poem. Examples for discussion: SPUD, where they throw the ball at someone unable to run or move; the game of "scissors cut paper cover rock"; hiding-go-seek. Ask the students to remember the rituals, participants, and settings of a game.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:

Write about what happens when you are playing a childhood game.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:

The poem and poetry writing idea speak to the adolescent's need for a re-integration of the identity elements.

REMEMBERING; STEREOTYPING

Countee Cullen - INCIDENT

(for Eric Walrond)

Once riding in old Baltimore,

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TO THE TEACHER:

One human process here is REMEMBERING. It is, however, a particular kind of remembering, a kind of deep imaging. You might ask the students to remember a particular incident - an incident which is real or imaginatively real. Students should have the option of writing about an imaginary incident, or about a real incident that has bothered them for a long time.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:

Write about remembering a particular incident - an incident which is hard to forget. The incident can be real or "made up."

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:

The poem and poetry writing idea impel the adolescent to examine his concern with appearances, with clannishness, and with defensive projecting (stereotyping). The idea of "remembering speaks to the adolescent's need for a re-integration of the identity elements, the need to understand one's past self in terms of the present.

CATALOGING (REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING)

Pablo Neruda - THERE IS NO FORGETFULNESS

If you ask where I have been

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TO THE TEACHER:
Some options: have the students look at lines 5-6; ask the students to complete the line "I only know about...." For a

more surreal list, have the students look at the last five lines in the poem: ask them to fill in the line "There are so many...that...." This can be done orally or in writing.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:

The poetry writing idea that I have selected is to have the students write a catalog poem using a list of things they would like to remember and a list of things they would like to forget.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:

The poem and poetry writing idea speak to the adolescent's need for a re-integration of the identity elements.

RELATING TO THE OPPOSITE SEX

Lucky Jacobs - ELEVATOR CONNECTION

Seeing the girl who stands all alone
in the elevator is more than he can stand.
For fourteen of the twenty floors
the silence is unbearable.
"Really slow" he says.
She smiles,
a smile somewhere between
"yes" and "how obvious."
"I'm going to the nineteenth floor"
he says.
She smiles,
a smile somewhere between
"how obvious" and "what a coincidence,
small world, married? I'm going to
the seventeenth."

TO THE TEACHER:

The poem has a universal (modern universal) setting, and involves a universal process - smiling. Students from eight to eighty, I think, will "know" what is meant by "the language of a smile." Students, like all human beings, have been unconsciously and consciously interpreting the meanings of smiles ever since they were born. You might have the students practice connotative smiles on each other. Ask them to describe each other's smiles, e.g., "aggressive - teeth bared like a wolf"; "arrogant - know it all"; "open - come on in and chat with me"; "coy"; "tension-relieving"; etc. Have the students imagine a particular incident in relation to a member of the opposite sex which might have caused their particular kind of smile. Let the other students try to guess the incident which caused the smile.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:

Write about a particular kind of smile from a member of the opposite sex in a particular setting.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:

The poem and poetry writing idea speak to the adolescent's concern with the opposite sex, and with appearances.

CATALOGING (BEING ALONE)

Denise Levertov - ONE A.M.

The kitchen patio in snowy

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TO THE TEACHER:
Ask the students to remember a time they stayed up alone, late at night. What things were quiet and still inside the house or room? What things were quiet and still outside the house? Call these things out, or list them.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:
Ask the students to write a catalog poem of quiet and still things within and without the house, late at night. Note that Levertov's objects are all outside the house. But this is much more difficult to do well, although it, of course, might be an option.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:
The poem and poetry writing idea address the adolescent's need for moratorium.

ADDRESSING A PERSON (EXPECTING)

Walt Whitman - POETS TO COME

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,
Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face.
Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
Expecting the main things from you.

TO THE TEACHER:
Students will probably be familiar with the following everyday talk: "I expect great things from him"; "he has great expectations"; "I expected the worst"; "she was not what I expected"; "yeah, I 'spect I will"; "she expected something else"; "he expected something else from me"; etc. Certain people expect certain things from us, yet sometimes we secretly expect to do different things. Poets often upset our expectations, but that is because they are interested in getting at the difference between appearance and reality. For example, Stephen Spender's father and uncle disliked poetry and wanted Stephen to become a politician; so Stephen became a poet. Ask the students to visualize a certain person who expects certain things from them; then ask the students to visualize certain things they expect of <u>themselves</u>. Maybe some of these expectations will be different; maybe they won't. Maybe the student doesn't know; maybe he does; maybe he'll discover something in the process of writing.

POETRY WRITING IDEA:
Write about the differences between what <u>a certain person</u> expects from you and what <u>you</u> expect from you. You might want to address your writing to that certain person.

ADOLESCENT CHARACTERISTIC:
The poem and poetry writing idea address the adolescent's concern with identity. The adolescent's concern with "family" is implicit.

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